

Don't Think of an Online Elephant: Explaining the Dearth of Conservative Political Infrastructure Online in America

By Dave Karpf, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Research Associate
Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions
David_Karpf@brown.edu

Abstract:

This paper explores the failed attempts by American Conservatives to replicate the online political infrastructure developed by “Netroots” Progressives. Organizations like DailyKos.com, MoveOn.org, and ActBlue.com have provided a major advantage to leftwing political campaigns, and the success of these groups has gone unmatched by the Right. The paper discusses three parallel causal explanations – (1) a natural progressive advantage based in ideological notions of citizen participation, (2) a situational progressive advantage based in Democratic out-party status from 2002-2006, creating a wide-open opportunity structure for innovators, and (3) a disruptive progressive advantage based in the ability of already-formed netroots communities-of-interest to sidetrack the development of isomorphic right-wing infrastructure during the early “gestation” period. Through large-scale data collection and comparative case analysis from the 2008 election, the paper speculates on the relative merits of these three overlapping explanations and discusses their implications for the future of online political action.

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Introduction

Where is the conservative equivalent to the large “netroots” (*internet grassroots*) political associations that now characterize progressive politics? The past two election cycles have been marked by the unmistakable rise of these groups within the American Left. Conservative political elites have frequently tried and failed to build their own equivalent infrastructure. While some scholars continue to treat the internet as an essentially nonpartisan medium (Davis 2009), others propose that the American Left is fundamentally better-suited to the “bottom-up” nature of the medium (Kerbel 2009). This paper summarizes three competing theses for why progressives currently enjoy such a large advantage online, and discusses the conditions under which equivalent rightwing infrastructure is likely to emerge. Drawing upon elite interviews, case examples, and a large-scale blogosphere dataset, it provides empirical evidence of the surprising failure of the “rightroots” thus far and highlights important trends in the partisan uptake of technological innovations over time.

At stake in this paper is a fundamental question about the partisan distribution of power in American politics. The rise of the progressive netroots has been one of the most dramatic features of recent American politics. MoveOn.org boasts over 4.5 million members and has become synonymous with the vocal Left. The DailyKos.com blogging community includes dozens of elected officials and major public officials who contribute to the user-generated “diaries” section of the site. The YearlyKos convention – since renamed the “Netroots Nation” convention – in 2007 featured 8 of 9 Democratic presidential hopefuls in a televised debate. The ActBlue.com fundraising portal has funneled over \$100,000,000 for Democratic candidates and leftwing Political Action

Committees since it was founded in 2004. Some of the volunteers who gathered around Howard Dean's 2004 campaign have gone on to form a major federated political association called Democracy for America, while others founded consulting firms such as Blue State Digital that have been instrumental in moving political campaigns online. The Obama campaign's field and online operations were run by veterans of this network of "netroots" political activists, as is the campaign's successor, Organizing for America. The Democratic Party network today has been revitalized by these new entrants, and they have taken power at the expense of previously-central actors such as the centrist Democratic Leadership Council. The Republican Party will either find a way to replicate these successes or face an widening competitive disadvantage in legislative and electoral campaign competition.

Why have conservatives proven so unsuccessful in replicating these online institutions? This paper discusses three competing causal arguments. The *Ideological Congruence* thesis suggests that the bottom-up nature of the internet is fundamentally better-suited to leftwing activism. The *Outparty Innovation Incentives* thesis claims that there are a host of incentives that lead the opposition party to more actively embrace strategic and technological innovations of all sorts. The *Merry Pranksters and their Digitized Wooden Shoes* thesis, meanwhile, claims that the particularities of online community-formation and low barriers-to-entry create an environment in which one side's partisan advantage on the internet actually prevents the opposing side from following suit. The paper discusses evidence for and against each of the arguments, though it finds stronger support for *Outparty Innovation Incentives* than for the other two.

The paper is divided into three primary sections. Section 1 details “all the dogs that didn’t bark,” by which I mean the various high-profile attempts by conservative interests to build internet-mediated organizations similar to the netroots associations mentioned above. Time and again, conservatives have announced high-profile attempts to build their own online infrastructure. Time and again, the results have proven disappointing. The recent wave of conservative anti-Obama activism has led some to prematurely announce that the “rightroots” now rival or exceed the size and strength of their progressive counterparts (Ruffini 2009). I provide a closer look at the data, revealing such claims to be overly optimistic. Section 2 then turns to the three competing explanatory theses, exploring each one in turn. After evaluating the evidence for and against each of these theses, section 3 offers a set of predictions for the near-term future of online conservatism, along with key indicators that researchers should watch for.

Section 1: “All the Dogs That Didn’t Bark”

The gap in online infrastructure is a recent phenomenon, even judged at the pace of heightened technological development. We should recall that the John McCain presidential primary campaign of 2000 was the cutting edge of fundraising after raising \$3 million in the ten days following the New Hampshire primary. (Klotz 2004, pg 77) “Web 1.0” clearly benefited Republicans, as sites like the Drudge Report and FreeRepublic.com offered an outlet for Republican critiques of the liberal media. As recently as 2005, it appeared to many observers as though there was no strong partisan advantage on the web, at least in terms of its most obvious instantiation, the political blogosphere. Adamic and Glance’s 2005 paper, “The Political Blogosphere and the 2004

Election: Divided They Blog” used hyperlink maps to demonstrate that leftwing and rightwing blogs operated as largely independent neighborhoods and, noting that conservatives linked to one another with greater frequency, implied that the Right was, if anything, leading in this arena. (Adamic and Glance 2005) Robert Ackland conducted a follow-up study with the same dataset and found that conservative bloggers were indeed more “prominent” online. (Ackland 2005)

At that time, conservative law professor Glenn “Instapundit” Reynolds was the most popular political blogger, Matt Drudge’s “Drudge Report” Protoblog stood unrivaled in its effectiveness, and the multi-author conservative blog PowerLine had been named Time magazine’s “Blog of the Year.” (Grossman 2004) In the public eye, progressive bloggers had made headlines by taking down Trent Lott after his Strom Thurmond speech, but conservative bloggers had countered by taking down Dan Rather after debunking the “Rathergate” forged memo. The Howard Dean campaign had turned heads as an example of the internet’s potential impact, but the collapse of the campaign gave plenty of fuel to skeptics’ arguments, making it a mixed bag to say the least. MoveOn was impressive in size and scope, but their efforts at combating the war and the Bush agenda had produced much noise and little tangible results.

Several scholars, borrowing from these early studies, continue to treat the web as though progressive and conservative uses of the medium were different, but generally equal. In his recent book, *Typing Politics*, Richard Davis goes to great lengths to provide examples of blogosphere-based political action from both sides of the aisle. (Davis 2009) Part of the challenge here is empirical: Adamic and Glance rely on hyperlink analysis in their 2005 study, while Ackland relies solely on site blogrolls. Operationalizing link

patterns as a direct measure of authority or power is problematic, however. Recent empirical advances (Karpf 2008a) allow us to draw more exacting comparisons between the liberal and conservative blogospheres.

Comparing blog networks

One difficulty in comparing the conservative and progressive “netroots” lies in accessing relevant data sources. Conservative bloggers scored well in Ackland’s 2005 study because they have a greater tendency to list one another in blogroll links than their progressive counterparts do. One reason for this is that conservative bloggers have much *larger* blogrolls than progressive bloggers. In a study conducted in November 2007, I found that the average elite conservative blog had 129 links, while the average progressive blog had only 72. (Karpf 2008a, pg 39) To provide a more comprehensive ranking system, in 2008 I launched the Blogosphere Authority Index (BAI), an aggregate tracking system which ranks the top 25 progressive and conservative blogs based on blogroll-mentions, hyperlinks, site traffic, and community activity. The BAI provides a time series of monthly rankings, documenting changes to the political blogosphere over time (freely available online at www.blogosphereauthorityindex.com). When looked at through this empirical lens, it quickly becomes apparent just how much stronger the progressive blogging network is than its conservative counterpart.

Of particular interest is the leading progressive blog, DailyKos.com. Beginning in October 2003, DailyKos has used a community blogging platform which allows its readers to contribute their own original content in the form of user diaries. As I demonstrate in a previous publication, such community blogs function as quasi-interest

groups (Karpf 2008b). The DailyKos community endorses and fundraises for candidates, selects issue priorities, runs pressure campaigns, and even holds an annual in-person convention. The primary difference between DailyKos and a traditional political association lies in staffing and operating costs, rather than in goals and objectives. The difference between DailyKos and other political blogs is even more noteworthy: a 2009 study based on the Blogosphere Authority Index found that more content is produced on DailyKos than through the combined total of the top 25 conservative blogs and remaining top 24 progressive blogs. (Karpf 2009, pg 17)

Having recognized the value of a site like DailyKos, conservatives founded RedState.com in 2004 as an equivalent site. Despite operating on a similar technical platform, however, RedState has failed to attract the type of vibrant participation found on DailyKos. In the September 2009 BAI rankings (based on data recorded from 9/14-9/20/2009), DailyKos community members posted 117,096 comments on one another's diaries and front page posts. RedState members posted 2,197. The largest conservative political blog, HotAir.com, included 30,208 comments – a good deal larger than RedState, but still roughly ¼ of the activity found on DailyKos. What's more, leading conservative blogs such as HotAir lack the type of structural community-engagement features that enable “kossacks” to act as an online political association. HotAir has a “closed” user registration policy, meaning that new visitors to the site are not able to post comments.

As a measure of overall comparative strength, I compile a “combined” version of the Blogosphere Authority Index every month. This allows us to make comparisons between the traffic, hyperlinks, and community activity on the top progressive and

conservative sites. The combined top 50 rankings thus allow for a measure of how the relative strength of each blogging network changes over time. When the BAI was initially compiled in November 2007, the average rank for progressive blogs was 23.5, while the average rank of conservative blogs was 27.48. That four-point difference indicates that, on average, the top half of the rankings was slightly weighted in favor of progressive blogs (an even distribution would produce average ranks of 25 for each). During the 2008 election cycle, that gap grew from four points to approximately 10 points, evidence that the increase in election-season traffic had benefited progressive blogs more than their conservative counterparts. All blogs experienced surges in traffic during the election season, but the surges were larger for the elite progressive blogs. (Karpf 2009a)

In February 2009, *Time Magazine* announced a list of the “most overrated blogs.” DailyKos was included in the list, with the rationale that, “with the Bush years now just a memory, Kos’s blog has lost its mission, and its increasingly rudderless posts read like talking points from the Democratic National Committee.¹” At around the same time, conservative commentators speculated that the Obama administration was producing a surge in conservative online activity rivaling the progressive netroots. The Blogosphere Authority Index tells a much different story. Table 1 below lists the average BAI ranks of the progressive and conservative blogospheres in every month since the election. The difference has fluctuated, from a minimum of 7.92 in December 2008 to a maximum of 12.24 in May 2009, but taken together they average out to 10.11, approximately the same gap that emerged during the 2008 election cycle. Elite conservative blogs have gained traffic during the Obama administration, but progressive blogs have as well. As a result,

¹ http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1879276_1879093_1879090,00.html

claims of DailyKos’s demise or Republican online resurgence are greatly exaggerated. And particularly amongst conservative blogs like RedState, that boast the same user-engagement opportunities provided by DailyKos, the conservative infrastructure deficit remains enormous.

Month	Progressive	Conservative	Difference
December ‘08	21.4	29.32	7.92
January ‘09	21.12	29.48	8.36
February ‘09	20.76	29.8	9.04
March ‘09	19.28	31.24	11.96
April ‘09	19.92	30.72	10.8
May ‘09	19.08	31.32	12.24
June ‘09	20.36	30.28	9.92
July ‘09	20	30.6	10.6
August ‘09	19.4	31.12	11.72
September ‘09	21	29.56	8.56

Table 1: Average BAI Ranks Over Time

A Conservative MoveOn?

As with RedState’s limited success in offering a “conservative DailyKos,” there have been several right-wing attempts at launching a “MoveOn for Conservatives.” RightMarch was the first such attempt, founded in 2003. By that time, MoveOn was transitioning from the small niche of online petition-gatherers to the 3 million-strong internet behemoth synonymous with the vocal left. Heralded in mass media coverage and

promoted by wealthy Republican backers, RightMarch promised to be, “the ‘Rapid Response Force’ against the ongoing liberal onslaught.”² It never lived up to this billing, however, failing to do much of anything with the large e-mail list they claim to have developed.³ In an interview with *Mother Jones* magazine, Bill Greene of RightMarch defended their lack of tactical innovation, stating, “well I don’t think that our members are as interested in [podcasting and social networking] because they’ve got families and they’re working people and they don’t have time to meet at someone’s house and watch a webcast.”⁴ In terms of fundraising capacity, RightMarch has been similarly underwhelming. According to data collected by the Center for Responsive Politics, RightMarch spent \$60,750 in the 2004 election cycle, versus MoveOn’s \$31.8 million.⁵ In 2006, RightMarch raised \$102,699 while MoveOn brought in \$28.1 million. They improved against their own standard in 2008, raising \$646,089, but this hardly compares to the \$38.4 million raised by MoveOn in the cycle (and at this point, MoveOn and some congressional candidates have demonstrated the ability to raise this much in a single day).⁶

A promising competitor to RightMarch, TheVanguard.org, was founded in March 2006 by a group of tech-savvy conservative leaders. With a strong base of sophisticated

² <http://www.rightmarch.com/about.htm> accessed online December 18, 2008.

³ In a 2005 interview with Politics Online internet radio (www.politicsonline.com/content/main/interviews/2005/greene/greene.doc), Bill Greene of RightMarch claimed an e-mail list of 2 million members, but was noticeably circumspect in doing so. The organization has been tight-lipped about its membership, tactics, and successes. Speaking editorially from my time in the non-profit world, this is often a sign that an organization has little to brag about.

⁴ *Mother Jones Online* July, 2007.

http://www.motherjones.com/interview/2007/07/david_all.html?welcome=true

⁵ Note that this MoveOn figure conflicts with MoveOn’s own reporting of over \$90 million raised. The difference likely is because much of MoveOn’s fundraising was bundled directly to the candidates. Nonetheless, this may indicate that RightMarch’s total fundraising is similarly underrepresented by the Center’s data.

⁶ RightMarch data available at

<http://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/lookup2.php?cycle=2008&strID=C00386482>

MoveOn data available at <http://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/lookup2.php?strID=C00341396>

internet entrepreneurs who had previously started the popular online financial transaction site, paypal.com, TheVanguard seemed better positioned to keep pace with MoveOn's breakneck pace of technological innovation. (Harkinson 2007) Despite heavy promotion from the outset and a collection of conservative activist heavyweights on their board and staff, though, the organization never fully coalesced. Today, two and a half years after launching (and two election cycles/multiple mass media stories later as well) the organization still declares on its website that it will be "launching soon."

Freedom's Watch, meanwhile, was launched by a collection of former Bush administration appointees and staffers with an initial wave of ads that countered MoveOn's controversial "Betray-Us" newspaper ad in the summer of 2007. In a January 20, 2008 feature story about the group in the Washington Post, titled "A Conservative Answer to MoveOn," Executive Director Joe Eule announced the group to be "a permanent political operation here in town. We're not going to be Johnny One Note." (Kane and Weisman 2008) Aided by a reported budget of \$200 million, this group was heralded as, finally, a successful conservative response. That excitement lasted all of three months, as a New York Times story in April, 2008 titled "Great Expectations for a Conservative Group Seem All but Dashed" described the organization as, "plagued by gridlock and infighting, leaving it struggling for direction" and coming up well short of its supposedly gigantic budget figures. The organization was almost solely funded by conservative casino mogul Sheldon Adelson – at the time the third-richest person in the country. (Luo 2008) After Adelson's company, Las Vegas Sands Corp, lost 95% of its stock value in the fall 2008 market decline, he withdrew his funding and the group announced that it would permanently shut its doors. (Ward 2008) As with community

blogs, conservatives have recognized the value of novel organizations like MoveOn, but their attempts to build an equivalent force have sputtered and failed.

Much media attention has recently been afforded to the “Tea Party” protests and conservative town hall protesters showing up at health care in-district meetings in August 2009. Conservative blogger Patrick Ruffini points to it as a major signal in a post proclaiming, “Rising Rightroots and Declining Netroots Now at Parity (or Better).” Though these protest activities are a sign that opposition party status creates greater opportunities for mobilization, the central role of Fox News in promoting and advertising the protests cannot be ignored. Matthew Kerbel describes this as an example of the “vertical” structure of the conservative netroots, as opposed to the “horizontal” structure of the progressive netroots. (Kerbel 2009) To date, the organizations sponsoring such events have yet to develop the large member lists and nimble tactical repertoires that typify MoveOn and similar internet-mediated organizations. In the absence of heavy promotion by a major media operation, there is little evidence of what these organizations can accomplish.

Competing Fundraising Portals: A Conservative ActBlue?

In the area of online fundraising, we see the same chasm develop with a few interesting wrinkles. The malleable approach that ActBlue has taken to fundraising has proven outstandingly effective, allowing bloggers Glenn Greenwald and Jane Hamsher of FireDogLake to raise \$349,842 in two weeks to fund an Independent Expenditure Campaign around the FISA issue and giving the DailyKos community the tools to out-fundraise the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in 5 of the 7 2006

congressional races where donations overlapped. (Karpf 2008b) ActBlue is particularly vital to a collection of blogs, interest groups, and social movement organizations newly formed among the online left. While MoveOn can afford to develop their own fundraising software platform, or to contract out to a vendor that can give tailored services, the same is unlikely to be true for a mid-tier blog like OpenLeft, and the ability for bloggers and online activists to raise money for short-term coalition efforts is premised on the availability of ActBlue to provide a trustworthy fundraising platform. Since ActBlue lets users set their own endorsement list and easily interfaces with a blog's infrastructure (including an embedded fundraising thermometer that lets visitors see how close the site is coming to its goal), it proves invaluable in lowering the infrastructure costs of smaller web-based activist groups.

The same cannot be said for ActBlue's rightwing equivalents. Launched in 2006, the "RightRoots" fundraising site was meant to be a Republican counter to ActBlue, but, crucially, it set out its own list of endorsees, developed by a small circle of prominent conservative bloggers and insiders, and chose not to give users the ability to develop their own lists. Micah Sifry of Personal Democracy Forum pointed out that this lack of malleable functionality meant, "It's probably fairer to see RightRoots as a mirror of the 'Netroots' fundraising pages on ActBlue, which focus attention on a handful of netroots-endorsed' candidates that have been hand-picked by a few key bloggers." (Sifry 2006) Indeed, if compared to that single ActBlue fundraising page, RightRoots performed acceptably, raising 1/5th the amount raised through joint DailyKos/MyDD/Swing State Project fundraising page.

RightRoots essentially fell into disuse in the 2008 election cycle, replaced by Slatecard.com, which suffered from the similar top-down management challenges. SlateCard raised “nearly \$650,000 for Republican candidates and committees” in the 2008 election cycle,⁷ setting the combined fundraising totals of the two Republican answers to ActBlue at around \$1 million in two cycles. ActBlue, meanwhile, has raised over \$85 million since 2004, nearly half of it in the 2008 election cycle. For some reason, despite seeing the obvious value of this type of site, Republican strategists have proven unable or unwilling to invest in the set-your-own-endorsement-list system that has made ActBlue so valuable to online progressives and political candidates. This is particularly perplexing given that (a) the software code involved is not terribly complicated and (b) the progressive advantage in this arena is so easily quantified in terms of dollars-raised.

There is one interesting exception to this story of conservative online fundraising failure, however: the Ron Paul “revolution” primary campaign. The “Paulites” are best-known for their single-day “moneybomb” on November 5th, 2007, which raised somewhere between \$3.75 and \$5 million. They also used meetup-style tools pioneered by the Dean campaign to promote local actions throughout the country. Though Paul never experienced Howard Dean’s meteoric rise and fall, his devoted base of supporters remains active, having set up an organization, Campaign for Liberty (www.campaignforliberty.com) that seeks to fill the same niche as Howard Dean’s campaign offspring, Democracy for America (DFA). It is far too early to evaluate success or failure of Campaign for Liberty, but as with the moneybomb itself, it is remarkable that the segment of the Conservative party coalition that appears to have most successfully emulated the development of netroots online infrastructure has been the

⁷ www.slatecard.com, accessed online December 19, 2008

upstart Paulites. Positively ridiculed by the elite conservative blogosphere, banished from comment threads wherever they popped up during the 2008 primary season, Ron Paul supporters have functioned as an outparty of sorts *within* the conservative coalition. And while the network of elite conservative consultants, party operatives, and politicians has consistently tried and failed to build web-based participatory communities, the one limited success has come from the vocal minority. I personally am skeptical as to whether there were enough Ron Paul supporters to provide a critical mass for sustained local action – the Dean campaign was much larger, and only left a lasting imprint in a select few cities – but this regardless provides a fascinating counterexample to be considered further⁸.

Slaying the Wrong Dragons – Conservapedia and QubeTV

Media critique would appear to be the one area where online conservatives seem to prove highly engaged and participatory. The “Rathergate” scandal remains the oft-cited example of conservative blogosphere efficacy (Davis 2009, Perlmutter 2008), while *Newsbusters*, with its slogan of “exposing liberal media bias,” is the one political community blog to rise in the BAI rankings in 2008. One possible difficulty for online conservatives appears to be that, building on this strength, they have frequently attempted to “slay the wrong dragons” in developing online communities-of-interest.

Conservapedia.com, for instance, offers a conservative alternative to Wikipedia’s “Neutral Point of View” standard, which conservative activists view as nonetheless displaying a liberal bias. QubeTV.tv, meanwhile, is set up as a conservative alternative

⁸ The launch of DFA after the Dean campaign is the subject of a separate ongoing research effort. The “critical mass” concept referenced above is discussed in detail in chapter 6 of my dissertation.

to YouTube. Neither of these sites attracts substantial traffic – not surprising because both Wikipedia and YouTube benefit from such overwhelming network externalities that they have effectively solved the online mass coordination problem for their related purposes. What incentive would an online conservative have for posting content to QubeTV rather than YouTube, knowing that the overwhelming number of online video viewers – be they conservative, liberal, or politically-apatetic – are visiting YouTube to view video content? Why, given the lack of restrictions on ideologically-related content-posting to YouTube and Wikipedia, would users en masse choose to switch to a site with smaller traffic and fewer network externalities?

The presence of sites like Conservapedia and QubeTV suggests that many conservative elites fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the new media environment. That alone is not worthy of note – many progressive elites misunderstand the new medium environment as well. But the central point of this section has been to demonstrate that, in every area where the progressive netroots have built strong political institutions, conservatives have tried and failed to duplicate those structures. The next section will discuss and evaluate competing explanations for *why* conservatives lag so far behind their progressive counterparts.

Ideology, Outparty Incentives, or Merry Pranksters? Three Explanatory Theses

Having established that there is a distinct gap in online infrastructure between the American Left and the American Right, we must ask *why* such a gap exists. In conversations with political bloggers, netroots activists, and fellow researchers, three brands of explanation have emerged. First is what I will term “ideological congruence”

or, in its strongest form, “ideological determinism.” This asserts that the Left is advantaged online because the bottom-up nature of the medium is better attuned to progressive ideology. Thus particularities of *ideological fit* lead to differential adoption. The second, “outparty innovation incentives,” asserts that technological innovations are generally adopted by the party out-of-power. For a host of reasons, the “team” which is losing in the political arena will look to change the rules of the game. Thus particularities of *timing and institutional control* lead to differential adoption. The third thesis, “merry pranksters,” focuses on the ability of large communities-of-interest to disrupt nascent opposing communities in their early developmental stage, an activity that is uniquely possible in an online environment of “ridiculously low transaction costs” of the medium itself. (Paquet 2003/Shirky 2008) Thus particularities *in group formation in a new media environment* lead to differential adoption. These explanations are not mutually exclusive; we can think of them as three variables contributing to the outcome, with each thesis suggesting primary importance for one over the other two:

Ideological Congruence + Outparty Incentives + Late-Forming Community Disruption = Differential Adoption Rates

This section will discuss each explanation in turn, as they lead to very different predictions about the likely future for conservative online institutions.

Thesis 1: Ideological Congruence

In numerous discussions of this topic (both informally and during the course of elite interviews), the first hypothesis offered is that the internet is, at some underlying level, a liberal medium. Progressives value community organizing, while conservatives

(memorably Rudy Giuliani in his 2008 Republican National Convention keynote address) treat it as a topic of ridicule. Slatecard and RightRoots, RightMarch and the Vanguard have all failed to give their users the sort of participatory toolset offered by their successful progressive counterparts because they are ideologically more attuned to a business culture of clearly-defined hierarchical roles. Likewise, the argument goes that talk radio is dominated by conservatives because it is listened to by blue collar, rural audiences during their drive to work. City-dwelling, creative-class liberals listen to National Public Radio, and thus Democratic attempts at breaking into this medium that blossomed in the early 1990s were doomed to failure.

There is a certain intuitive appeal to this argument. As Clay Shirky and others have argued, the lowered transaction costs of the internet encourage “ridiculously easy group formation” (Shirky 2008, Paquet 2002) Rasmus Kleis Nielsen notes in a recent article that the ease of online communications can nonetheless lead to “overcommunication, miscommunication and communication overload.” (Nielsen 2009) If the American left’s populist ethos encourages its members to take advantage of online community-formation opportunities at higher rates than their rightwing counterparts, and if a devotion to the craft of community organizing leads the left to better utilize social coordination tools, then one certainly would expect the internet to be a boon to the liberal end of the political spectrum.

Likewise, conservatives themselves often argue that they have a more “top-down” ideology that is perhaps better-suited to talk radio as a medium. Thus they refuse to offer the malleable functionality of an ActBlue or the agenda-setting responsiveness of a MoveOn because they believe, fundamentally, in hierarchical decision-making. As

MoveOn Executive Director Eli Pariser put it when interviewed about his upstart conservative competitors, “The Vanguard folks are spending a lot of time thinking about what they want, and then figuring out how to spin it to their members.” (Harkinson, pg 35) One of MoveOn’s key innovations, by contrast, has been their exacting message-testing practices, which help them identify the issues and tactics which are most attuned to the preferences of their membership. One MoveOn staffer noted to me that the chief mistake made by scholars and journalists when studying the organization is in suggesting that MoveOn adopts radical tactics in order to gain an audience: “radical tactics don’t go viral. If you want to build a large audience and have an impact, you need to listen to your membership.”⁹ There is a strong populism here, a notion that the lowering of online transaction costs can free the pent-up energies of the (progressive) masses and give them a larger and more powerful voice in the political system. Not surprisingly, this is particularly appealing to social movement activists who have long contended that theirs is a battle of “the people versus the powerful.”

The conservative version of the thesis likewise starts from an assumption that they themselves are part of a “silent majority.” But conservatives tend to believe that the internet favors the lifestyle preferences of the “professional activist” left. Bill Greene, founder of RightMarch, suggests that “most of [his organization’s members] are just hardworking everyday patriotic Americans that have families and kids and dogs and cats and jobs.” [Harkinson, pps 34-35] Likewise, grassroots conservatism has long been based in offline institutions such as churches, suggesting that conservatives do not turn online to form communities, because they are already members of real-world communities. If “everyday patriotic Americans” are too busy for blogging or MoveOn-

⁹ Interview notes. December 13, 2008.

style houseparties, then we should see the “activist class” among the political left develop more vibrant online community infrastructure, because they are the ones who primarily have the time for such activities.

The difficulties with treating Ideological Congruence as a full-fledged explanatory narrative are threefold, however. Firstly, it does not provide a robust explanation for previous eras of grassroots conservatism in American history. Both the Goldwater-era conservatives in the 1960s and 1970s and Ralph Reed’s Christian Coalition in the 1990s engaged in substantial grassroots community organizing. Were these conservatives less “hardworking?” Did they have fewer “kids and dogs and cats and jobs?” Community organizing is not an activity solely appreciated by the left, even if this was a talking point in the last election. Likewise, MoveOn’s substantial membership message-testing framework has much in common with the types of focus group activities that business managers are well familiar with. MoveOn and other internet-mediated groups call for membership input and voting on those issues which the staff feels are appropriate – hardly consensus-based decision making. Blogger and political consultant Jon Henke of TheNextRight.com offers a counterargument: “While the Right has been in power, defending the status quo, the Left has been storming the castle. Storming the castle is *much* more fun.” (Henke 2008)

This points to the second concern: if the internet is naturally attuned to the political left, then we should see a leftwing online advantage in other countries. Anecdotal data from the United Kingdom suggests that British online conservatives, who have had the “castle-storming” task of criticizing the liberal majority party, have developed an online advantage. One could of course argue that British conservatism and

American conservatism are distinct entities, but such an argument casts a pale on the ideologically deterministic thesis even further. The Democratic and Republican coalitions have changed over time, and in so changing they have emphasized various ideological arguments to a greater or lesser degree. If this particular brand of American conservatism is a poor fit for the online information regime, wouldn't that presage an ideological shift in the conservative coalition itself? If there are various brands of conservatism, then the internet is not a particularly "progressive" medium, it is just a medium poorly-suited to the Republican party elite circa 2004-2009.

The third (and deepest) concern with the thesis is its teleological nature. "Progressives dominate online, therefore the internet is a progressive medium." Such an argument also maintains that talk radio is an inherently conservative medium, because conservatives dominate those airwaves. The latest data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project finds only marginal partisan differences in internet usage, with 55% of Republicans, 61% of Democrats, and 48% of Independents turning to the internet for political news, and 49% of Republicans, 50% of Democrats, and 48% of Independents using the internet, email, or text to "learn about the campaign and engage in the political process." (Smith and Rainie 2008, pg 20) Given that Republicans and Democrats are similarly logging onto the web, it is unclear why the political left gravitates towards one type of site while the political right gravitates towards another. Ideological congruence is hard to disprove, but for this same reason it proves to be almost "too easy" of an explanation. While I grant that ideology likely has *some* impact on the development of online infrastructure today, the evidence from history and from cross-national comparison cautions against placing too much causal impact on this explanation.

Thesis 2: Outparty Innovation Incentives

These very critiques of the Ideological Determinism thesis point to an alternative argument. History and cross-national comparison both suggest a set of *structural* mechanisms guiding the partisan uptake of campaign and technological innovations. At the organizational, candidate, and party network levels, there are several incentives that lead us to expect the party out-of-power to more aggressively adopt novel communications platforms and campaign tactics. For new organizations, as Henke pointed out, “Storming the castle is a lot more fun.” It also proves to be the case that organizing as the opposition to government policymakers is a more successful business model. For candidates, innovative campaign strategies offer an opportunity to “change the rules of the game,” a strategy which is more appealing to those darkhorse candidates who are expected to have only an outside chance under the existing “rules.” Within party networks, new campaign technologies are introduced by a new set of elite actors displacing the previous set of established actors, and that displacement is more likely to happen when a party has been losing elections and is searching for new ideas and new leadership. These three perspectives combine to form the *Outparty Innovation Incentives* Thesis, or the “opportunity structure” thesis. It bears noting that this thesis mutes not only the role of ideology, but also the particularities of the medium itself. Rather, this thesis is concerned with political innovations in general, with the new generation of internet-mediated organizations and online campaign tools being the latest example of the recurring pattern.

Outparty Innovation Incentives in the Interest Group Community

Henke's colorful suggestion about "storming the castle" finds additional support from the history of interest group mobilization. Recall, for instance, that MoveOn only developed a substantial membership base and reputation as the central outlet for the anti-war movement. For several years, the organization was able to unite its membership under the banner of opposing the Bush Administration's latest initiative, a strategy which has proven a critical element of their fundraising model (see Karpf 2009b). MoveOn's staff has demonstrated a clear awareness that the transition from mobilization-in-opposition to promotion of a positive issue agenda requires a shift in resources and strategies, leading to their investment in a 50% staff increase to bulk up support for the MoveOn Council system.¹⁰ Likewise, the Sierra Club's membership rolls more than doubled after Ronald Reagan assumed the Presidency, as the organization was able to cast Secretary of the Interior James Watt as an identifiable villain attacking status quo environmental protections. Bill Clinton's election led to a membership decrease among various leftwing interest groups, a decrease that was mitigated when Newt Gingrich was elected Speaker of the House behind the Contract with America. In this light, it bears noting that the previous periods of heavy grassroots conservatism, as seen with the Goldwater era and the Christian Coalition, both occurred when the Democratic Party held power in government.

It is arguably the case, then, that the flow of resources (both money and potential volunteers) to the interest group population fluctuates based on the party in power, increasing during periods when political associations can serve as an outlet for political discontent. If so, then if equally-skilled political entrepreneurs on both sides of the

¹⁰ Personal correspondance, December 13, 2008.

ideological spectrum were seeking to launch novel political associations at a given moment in time, we should expect the side that is out-of-power to have greater success. It then follows that we ought to see increases in conservative interest group activism, including the birth of new, internet-mediated conservative organizations, now that the Obama administration has been elected and is attempting to enact its policy agenda.

Early indicators provide some support for this assertion. The conservative group AmericanSolutions.com was launched in August 2008 to promote the “Drill Here, Drill Now, Pay Less,” oil and gas proposal spearheaded by Newt Gingrich. Seizing the opportunity presented by skyrocketing gasoline prices and casting the Democratic Congress as the villain responsible, the site garnered substantial media exposure and built a substantial email-based member list. Likewise, the April 15th “Tax Day Tea Party” protests included hundreds of thousands of conservative participants in simultaneous protests around the country, all organized through a centralized website and promoted through the political blogosphere and conservative media outlets. As previously noted, these protests have been heavily promoted by a large scale “old media” outfit – Fox News – but as Ruffini points out, “Fox News existed in the latter Bush years and during the McCain interlude and was unable to conjure up a similar display of enthusiasm in that period.” (Ruffini 2009) What has changed between 2008 and 2009 is not Fox News’s support for conservative issue priorities, but the opportunities for conservative critique of governmental priorities.

Outparty Innovation Incentives at the Candidate Level

Writing 35 years ago, David Mayhew offered the following observation in *Congress: The Electoral Connection*: "...for members in great electoral danger it may on balance be wise to resort to ostentatious innovation." (Mayhew 1974, pg 49) For individual electoral candidates, there exists a set of official rules and informal norms regarding the campaign process. The rules (campaign law) are well-established and only change through legislative or judicial decision-making. The norms, however, are a set of shared understandings among political consultants, party elites, large donors, interest group leaders, and journalists. The value of yard signs and robocalls, for instance, has only recently begun to be measured through the Green and Gerber field experiments (Green and Gerber 2004). Yard signs are used almost universally in campaigns, however, because of the shared understanding among the various elites listed above that successful campaigns are *supposed* to have them. Mayhew's point, simply enough, is that at the candidate level, those individuals perceived as longshot or "darkhorse" candidates have an incentive in adopting novel strategies that fall outside the existing norms. If the widely-shared expectation is that you are going to lose, try to alter the rules of the game. And since formal campaign law *rules* are not alterable, that leaves technological and strategic innovations as the best opportunity.

We find particularly good evidence for this instinct in Presidential campaigns. It bears noting that, in the 2000 primaries, the McCain campaign was viewed as *the* trailblazer in online fundraising. Given the candidate's 2008 admission that he himself used neither e-mail nor the internet, we can safely assume that this was not because of a personal predisposition in favor of new campaign technologies. (Harnden 2008) Rather, George W. Bush was the established frontrunner, and the McCain campaign embraced

new technologies, “ostentatious innovations,” in an effort to change the campaign dynamics. Likewise, the Howard Dean campaign’s meteoric rise occurred entirely before a single caucus vote had been cast in Iowa. Dean chose a strident tone (“I’m here to represent the Democratic Wing of the Democratic Party”) and a novel communications platform that let his supporters self-organize through Meetup.com. These Meetups and the online fundraising they supported, more than his anti-war stance, were what attracted such heavy media attention. Without the technological innovations, there would have been little to separate Dean from perennial fringe primary candidates like Dennis Kucinich. And whereas McCain’s and Dean’s technological innovations failed to secure them the nomination, Obama’s primary victory was largely based on his overwhelming support in Caucus states where his internet-mediated field program overwhelmed Hillary Clinton’s and took her campaign staff completely by surprise.

Note that in each of these cases, we are discussing a “darkhorse” candidate in a highly-contested, high-profile Presidential race. A case could be made that the Ned Lamont and Jim Webb Senate primary campaigns, with their heavy inclusion and outreach to the “netroots” blogosphere provide similar example of such innovation. (Kerbel 2009) I would posit that substantial campaign innovations, if we understand them to be alterations to the presiding “norms” among the network of actors who are heavily invested in campaigns, will primarily be found in races that are (1) highly-contested and (2) competing for high enough office to attract substantial campaign funding, staffing, volunteers, and media interest. The longshot candidate for State Senate and the challenger to a Congressperson with 80% approval ratings may have the same interest in “ostentatious innovation” as the darkhorse Presidential candidate, but

campaign innovations only change the presiding rules of the political system when they are (a) widely-noticed and (b) credited as “successful.” Such notice and success can only occur when the stakes are high enough to attract media attention and substantial financing, and when the contest is close enough to affect shared expectations. Put another way, if a new communications strategy allows a challenger to win 30% of the vote on election day rather than 15%, journalists and campaign elites will still categorize the campaign as a “blowout loss.”

Darkhorse candidates, particularly in presidential primaries, can be found simultaneously in both parties; the Democratic Party enjoyed a Senate majority heading into the 2008 election, but Al Franken (D-MN) and Kay Hagan (D-NC) were nonetheless challengers in their individual races. But if we aggregate across the subset of races that are both high-profile and closely-contested, the outparty is likely to have substantially more challengers, providing an increased number of widely-noticed races where a strategic or technological innovation is likely to be attempted and, if successful, become widely adopted into the party network’s normative understandings of what should be included in an “effective campaign.”¹¹

Regarding Old Dogs and New Tricks: Outparty Innovation Incentives at the Party

Network Level

¹¹ One corollary of this thesis, then, is that scholars interested in the internet’s impact on political campaigning should *not* be treating all campaigns as equal. There has been a trend in the literature toward quantitative research that counts the total number of candidate websites that include specific communications technologies – YouTube or FaceBook or Blogs (Gulati and Williams 2007, Williams and Gulati 2008, Williams and Gulati 2009, Kerbel and Bloom 2006, Klotz 2009). This technocentric research agenda fails to distinguish between the types of campaigns that we should expect to feature innovations and the types we should expect to stand-pat.

Innovation incentives at the candidate level only trickle up to the outparty as a whole if they affect the intra-party distribution of power. It is at this level that, I would argue, the outparty innovation incentives are most empirically demonstrable. Power within party networks can be understood as a zero-sum game of sorts. The rise of netroots power, for instance, has clearly come at the expense of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, which dominated Democratic politics in the 1990s and was the subject of intense criticism by Markos Moulitsas and others. (Moulitsas 2008) This distinction is even clearer among campaign consultants, where it can be assigned dollar amounts. Dulio (2004) notes that campaign consultants tend to specialize in particular campaign tools, with certain consultants focusing on direct mail and others focusing on robocalls, for instance. Given that individual campaign budgets are finite, dollars awarded to a new media consultant come at the expense of dollars awarded to an old media consultant. Consider what this means for the partisan adoption of new campaign strategies and technologies at the party network level: if new technologies and strategies tend to emerge with a new set of consultants, *displacing* an older set of established consultants (if, within consulting, only rarely do we observe the “old dogs” mastering the “new tricks”), and the party that has sustained a string of recent election losses is more likely to replace the old campaign teams with the new, then a strong explanatory mechanism exists for why we should expect the outparty to lead the way, across time, in new embracing new political uses of technology.

As evidence, consider Amy Sullivan’s widely-read call-to-arms following the 2004 election, evocatively titled “Fire the Consultants!” Sullivan’s essay raised the central question, “Why do Democrats promote campaign advisors who lose races?” She

went on to provide an expose of sorts into the elite network of Democratic campaign consultants and strategists: “Every sports fan knows that if a team boasts a losing record several seasons in a row, the coach has to be replaced with someone who can win. Yet when it comes to political consultants, Democrats seem incapable of taking this basic managerial step.” (Sullivan, 2005) Echoing Sullivan’s words, the netroots organized a nationwide campaign to name Howard Dean as the new chair of the Democratic National Committee, an effort premised on Dean’s controversial “50 State Strategy” which massively reallocated resources through the state party affiliate system. (Kamarck 2006) Two years later, one of the largest campaign consulting firms behind the wave of Democratic Congressional victories was Blue State Digital, founded by several alumni of the Dean campaign. One of the founders, Joe Rospars, went on to serve as New Media Director for the Obama campaign. Though a large-scale network analysis of consulting contracts in the Democratic and Republican party systems is beyond the scope of this dissertation project¹², the anecdotal evidence is overwhelming. The Democratic Party network advances in campaign technology have been almost entirely driven by Blue State Digital and a handful of other consulting firms founded by alumni of the Dean campaign. These contracts have flowed to a new generation of leftwing party operatives at the expense of a previous generation.

The contrast with the Republican Party network is stark. It is not the case that no Republicans “get it” with regards to new media technologies and campaign techniques. Patrick Ruffini, Michael Turk, Jon Henke and others are Republican strategists held in high regard within the technology consulting community, and often called upon by the media as authoritative sources on the subject. Ruffini is the former head of the

¹² I intend to pursue such an analysis as a follow-up research effort.

Republican National Committee's Internet Department, Turk was the RNC's e-campaign director until 2005, and Henke was hired by George Allen in the Virginia 2006 Senate race to coordinate counterstrategy against the netroots Jim Webb supporters. The key difference between these individuals and their Democratic counterparts is their "soft power" within the party network, and the amount of consulting contracts they receive. Simply put, the "Internet people" within elite Democratic circles are now considered key players, while in Republican circles they are still relegated to the periphery. Republican technology consultant David All remarked in a 2007 interview that "The RNC has never called me. They don't call any of the tech and politics crowd. They're just going it alone, which is fine if you want to be a failure. We've never needed the internet before..." (Shulman 2007, pg 34)

A few days after losing the 2008 Presidential election, a group of longtime Republican elites – including Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform and Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council – gathered at the home of conservative scion Brent Bozell, President of the Media Research Center. (Vargas 2008) Ruffini, Turk, Henke, and All were not invited. Writing about the meeting on TheNextRight.com (a community blog which, despite mentions in the mainstream media and the elite blogosphere, fails to appear in the BAI top 25), Ruffini suggested, "Whatever happened at the country estate will be irrelevant to the future of the movement. I'll bet not a single person under 40 was even at the table... The future will be shaped digitally ... on blogs like this one, RedState, Save the GOP, American Scene, and the dozens I have a feeling will be created in the wake of Tuesday's wake-up call." (Ruffini 2008) Ruffini and company instead launched a website, RebuildTheParty.com, that featured an online

petition urging the candidates for RNC chair to embrace and fund online infrastructure. Henke has similarly noted that one major difference between the progressive and conservative netroots today is that many progressive bloggers hold the position full-time, as opposed to top conservative bloggers who are also political consultants, media figures, or lawyers¹³

Whether these specific efforts prove successful or not, the parallels to the netroots activity in 2004 are illustrative. Along with the advantages that accrue to interest groups when mobilizing opposition, and the stochastic increase in opportunities for innovative campaign strategies among high-profile “darkhorse” campaigns, the longer a party coalition endures electoral defeat, the greater the calls for “firing the coaches.” Innovative campaign strategies and campaign technologies are introduced by a new set of elite actors within the party network. The success of those actors comes at the expense of existing partisan elites, and thus it is heavily influenced by how well-entrenched those elites happen to be at a given moment in time. Given enough electoral losses, Democratic Party elites called for “firing the consultants.” That was driven neither by ideology nor by the particularities of online communication platforms, but rather by the shifting opportunity structure provided to new entrants to an elite system that is winning versus one that is losing.

The Outparty Innovation Incentives thesis does a good job of explaining many of the historical drivers behind the progressive-conservative online infrastructure gap. It also helps to explain why British conservatives, as the outparty, hold an apparent advantage in the UK blogosphere. That said, the internet has often been described as the “largest advance in communications technology since the invention of the printing press.”

¹³ Interview notes, Jon Henke. April 21, 2009.

Leaving the nature of the medium itself muted in our explanation thus seems problematic. In particular, outparty innovation incentives do not adequately explain why conservative bloggers and other online elites continually make certain basic mistakes. Why do the top conservative blogs all close their user registration, stifling the growth of their attendant communities? Why do conservative MoveOns fail to ask their membership to vote? Why do SlateCard and RightRoots fail to give registered users the ability to create their own endorsement lists? The *Ideological Congruence* thesis may explain this – conservatives might at base simply prefer hierarchy and limited interaction. But another possibility deserves serious consideration.

Thesis 3: Those Wacky Saboteurs

In approaching this topic, I am reminded of an urban legend of sorts from my undergraduate institution, Oberlin College. Oberlin is a small liberal arts college, with a strong history of leftwing activism. During my time there, the campus boasted five socialist organizations and a Student Democrats chapter. The story goes that there had once been a campus Republicans chapter, until the end of one year when the socialists decided to have a little fun. Several of the student socialists learned that the campus Republicans would be elected the following year's officers at their next meeting, and that anyone could vote. They promptly organized a crowd of their friends to show up to the meeting, elect themselves, and disband the group. Dispirited, Oberlin Republicans receded into disorganization.

The campus socialists *could* take such an action because it was easy. They *would* take such an action because it was fun. In comparing the vibrant leftwing netroots to the

less-organized rightwing attempts to build parallel institutions, one has to wonder whether there is a dark side to the internet's "ridiculously easy group formation." Groups like DailyKos, Dean for America, and ActBlue were all able to develop under the cloak of relative internet anonymity. In their early stages, though anyone could join such groups, the vast majority of people motivated to do so would be supporters. When conservatives try to build their own equivalent spaces, however, they inherently announce them as "valuable online real estate," thus attracting *Merry Pranksters and their Digitized Wooden Shoes*.¹⁴

To be clear, it is not the contention of this thesis that progressives are breaking any laws or nefariously attempting to undermine conservative political associations. Rather, the lowered transaction costs of the web allow large, partisan communities-of-interest to disrupt the activities of opposing communities-of-interest with tremendous ease. There is some evidence that progressive bloggers, particularly those who populate the humor-oriented blogs Wonkette.com and SadlyNo.com, find pleasure in acting as "merry pranksters," harassing online conservatives. Conservatives display similar preferences, but are at a tremendous size disadvantage. The contention of this thesis is that, in the presence of mature communities-of-interest from the opposite end of the political spectrum, developers of conservative online infrastructure adopt policy choices that leave their sites less vulnerable to attack, but also less capable of promoting community participation. This presents a community-formation puzzle in the current technological environment that had not been present in any previous information regime,

¹⁴ The first "saboteurs" were dutch peasants who would break machines by throwing their wooden shoes, or "sabots" into the machinery. Thus "digitized wooden shoes" is a term meant to evoke the earliest, less-deadly meaning of the word.

and thus raises the question of whether conservatives will in fact be able to develop parallel online infrastructure. I offer three such examples below.

Wonkette Helps to “Rebuild the Party”

As previously mentioned, in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 election, a group of “ideologically diverse young Republicans” launched a website urging the RNC chairman candidates to support a 10-point action plan to strengthen and modernize the Republican Party. (Ambinder 2008) Along with an e-petition, “action network,” and a blog, the website also featured a platform for user-generated content:

ideas.rebuildtheparty.com. This is exactly the type of community engagement that progressives often criticize online conservatives for ignoring. Like Democracy for America’s “endorsement” tool or MoveOn’s “Bush in 60 seconds” contest, it invites users to register with the site, then submit their own ideas for rebuilding the party, cast votes in favor of one another’s ideas, and comment on each idea individually.

When the liberal comedy blog Wonkette.com got wind of the effort, their active community saw an opportunity for some light entertainment. Within hours, the most popular suggestions on the site included “Hire more ninjas” and several references to crass inside-Wonkette jokes. Their top suggestion received 4,344 votes and 1,608 comments before being closed down by the site administrators.¹⁵ So many of the suggestions came from left-wing pranksters that genuine suggestions disappeared from the list. And though the site administrators eventually added a distributed moderation tool that made such antics easier to identify and remove, the community-building opportunity was essentially destroyed by the comedy blog community’s actions. The Wonkette

¹⁵ <http://ideas.rebuildtheparty.com/pages/general/suggestions/68216?page=31>

community themselves referred to the action as “juvenile harassment” and “puerile antics”¹⁶ In discussing the action on their site, one regular poster wrote, “Look, in the end who cares? We pulled a stupid, very fun prank... Wonkette is for the cynics who’d like a better world, but know how the game is rigged.”¹⁷

Wonkette is a politically-oriented community-of-interest, albeit one that primarily exists to make fun of politicians. Interestingly, Wonkette is not considered part of the elite liberal blogging community in the BAI methodology because the other elite blogs in the cluster do not link to it in their blogrolls. Wonkette is more of a gossip blog than a forum for political discussion and mobilization. It creates a substantial problem for conservative internet-mediated organizations attempting to adopt the community-engaging tactics of a DFA or a MoveOn. MoveOn and DFA are able to treat all email recipients as members, and hold open voting processes, because of their existing size advantage. Online conservatives could attempt to rig such votes – indeed, the internet term for coordinated online poll attacks of this type is “Freeping,” because the action was pioneered by the conservative forum FreeRepublic.com – but such attacks would have little effect. There are over 4.5 million MoveOn email recipients. There is no such hub for conservatives to coordinate an online voting attack (sarcastic or otherwise). And while the “serious” political hubs such as MoveOn and DFA do not engage in such juvenile antics, the threat from hubs like Wonkette nonetheless prevents conservative sites from adopting the same tools that make the progressive internet-mediated organizations successful.

¹⁶see <http://wonkette.com/tag/rebuild-the-party>

¹⁷ “anonymous office zombie.” 2:50PM, November 12th, 2008. <http://wonkette.com/404325/american-people-give-republican-party-major-responsibility-big-ale-on-truck-nutz#comments>

The “SadlyNaughts” and Closed Registration on Conservative Blogs

SadlyNo.com is among the top 25 blogs in the progressive community, routinely receiving about 100 comments per post and attracting roughly 10,000 pageviews/day. The site self-describes as a “liberal progressive humor site” and describes its niche as follows:

“The site’s main running joke is in finding embarrassing slips or untrue statements by conservatives and linking to a refutation, saying, “Sadly, No!” Other running gags include posting pictures of conservative columnists on Internet dating sites, battling with a “singing troll” who sends homemade songs deriding the site’s contributors and commenters, and doing line-by-line putdowns of columns by Christian evangelists and other right-wingers. Sadly, No! also occasionally publishes phony columns at right-wing sites, and engages in other pranks.”¹⁸

When SadlyNo links to a conservative blogger, that individual’s blog incurs a spike in traffic and a flood of argumentative replies in the comments section of their highlighted post. The “SadlyNaughts” engage with conservatives as a band of merry pranksters, attempting to egg their ideological opponents on into fits of rage. This is the very essence of throwing “digitized wooden shoes,” with the dramatic reduction in online transaction costs allowing a few hundred progressives to have fun at the expense of nascent conservative bloggers. Again, this activity of “internet trolling” is hardly limited to the left end of the ideological spectrum. But the size advantage enjoyed by progressive communities-of-interest means that the 20th largest progressive political blog can easily derail the comment threads of nearly any conservative counterpart. In point of fact, the September, 2009 Blogosphere Authority Index records only three conservative blogs with heavier comment traffic than SadlyNo.

¹⁸ www.sadlyno.com/about Accessed December 18, 2008.

In a March 30th, 2009 article for the *Washington Times*, conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart complained about these tactics. He claims that “Hugh Hewitt’s popular site shut off its comments section because of the success of these obnoxious invaders... Other right-leaning sites such as Instapundit and National Review Online refuse to allow comments, knowing better than to flirt with the online activist left.” (Breitbart 2009) The prankster antics of the “SadlyNaughts” may help to explain this puzzle: to the extent that blogs can operate as quasi-interest groups, this choice seems supremely counterproductive because it shuts off the first step in the community’s “ladder-of-engagement,” preventing new “members” from signing up and participating. Yet in light of these harassment tactics from left-wing pranksters, such a policy choice also appears to be an entirely rational response.

DailyKos Urges, “Mitt for Michigan”

In his 2008 book, *Taking on the System*, Markos Moulitsas describes the “Mitt for Michigan” campaign that he launched on DailyKos on January 10, 2008:

“Without a real Democratic contest on the ballot, and a lack of party registration in Michigan, this is an open primary. Anyone can pick up a Republican ballot. So Michigan Democrats and independents who want to see the Republican battle royale continue should just take a few minutes on Tuesday, January 15th to cast a ballot for Mitt Romney in the Republican primary.”

“...If we can help push Mitt over the line, not only do we help keep their field fragmented, but we also pollute Romney’s victory. How ‘legitimate’ will the Mittster’s victory look if liberals provide the margin of victory? Think of the hilarity that will ensue. We’ll simply be adding fuel to their civil war, never a bad thing from our vantage point.” (Moulitsas, pg 173)

“Kos” does not speak for the entire progressive blogosphere, but he certainly does speak *to* much of it. In response to commenters’ replies that progressives should be above such dirty tricks, he offered the following rejoinder:

“There are some concerned that this is ‘dirty tricks’ and that we shouldn’t ‘stoop to their level.’ This is perhaps the key difference between traditional liberals and movement progressives. The former believe that politics is a high-minded debate about ideas, the latter have seen movement conservatives use every tool at their disposal to steal power and cling to it.” (Moulitsas, pg 174)

He notes that the campaign was a “big PR success for *Daily Kos*,” and uses the example to punctuate his general belief that “If the cause is just, then the goal should be victory. All reasonable options should be on the table.” (Moulitsas, pg 175) Given the infinitesimal costs of placing a hyperlink into a DailyKos frontpage post, and the hundreds of thousands of eyeballs that such a link reaches, it may indeed be the case that one reason TheVanguard, RightMarch, and Freedom’s Watch have failed to engage with their member base in the same style as MoveOn is out of a *legitimate* fear that progressives will swarm the sites and game the system.

It would seem then that, for reasons of strategy or sport, the size advantage enjoyed by progressive internet-mediated organizations creates substantial difficulties for conservatives seeking to create parallel online infrastructure. These progressives are breaking no laws, nor are they as individuals engaging in activities foresworn by the right. But the size of existing progressive online communities, which were allowed to form unencumbered from mass partisan harassment, alters the development path for their conservative counterparts. Apart from ideology or outparty innovation incentives, the dramatic reduction of transaction costs that is itself a defining feature of online communication causes substantial problems for new conservative attempts to build

internet-mediated participatory communities. It is an open question whether the dearth of conservative online infrastructure is a temporary or permanent feature of the new political landscape, and certainly clear that conservatives have added challenges due to their latecomer status.

Section 3: Implications for the Future of Online Conservatism

In light of these competing theses, what conclusions can we draw about the future of online conservatism? One suggestion that I must reject is the notion that, just as the American Left has never developed a robust talk radio presence, so too will the American Right never develop a robust online presence. The problem with this equivalence is that the internet is itself a much larger communications revolution than talk radio. Democrats could still compete in elections without a major talk radio presence, because talk radio affects a relatively small portion of American life. The Internet, by contrast, has become deeply ingrained in all of our systems. As the portion of American life that can be accurately described as “entirely offline” continues to dwindle, it becomes near-impossible for economic or political actors to ignore the digital media environment.

This paper has not attempted to provide a decisive causal answer to why the right trails online. Rather, it has laid out three overlapping theoretical arguments and described some of the mechanisms behind each. Depending on which is most prominent, we should see Republican online infrastructure emerge at a quicker or slower pace. The three theses, once again, can be represented as follows:

Ideological Congruence + Outparty Incentives + Late-Forming Community Disruption = Differential Adoption Rates

The strongest form of the Ideological Congruence Thesis (which I would term Ideological Determinism) cannot be correct. It leaves no room for past periods of grassroots conservatism, and little room for the success of online conservatives in, for instance, the United Kingdom. That said, these very exceptions, and the success of Ron Paul's online supporters in generating money and internet-mediated enthusiasm, points to a central prediction about the future of online conservatism. Both UK Conservatives and Ron Paul Libertarians are a different *type* of ideological conservative than currently dominates the Republican Party. Parties, viewed over time, represent changing ideological coalitions. The Republican Party of 1954 was a different ideological beast than the Republican Party of 2004. And we have already seen that the success of the progressive netroots came at the expense of central actors within the Democratic Party coalition – actors who themselves preferred a more “top-down” approach. To the extent that the internet advantages “bottom-up” organizing, then, what we can predict is that the development of parallel online institutions in the Republican Party will be accompanied by a shift in the party coalition itself.

Such a prediction blends well with the predictions coming out of the Outparty Innovation Incentives Thesis. This paper has discussed outparty innovation incentives occurring on three levels – organizational, candidate, and party coalition. The Ideological Congruence Thesis would seem to support the notion that we are likely to see dramatic shifts in power within the Republican Party coalition over time. *When* will we see such shifts, though? To the extent that our second thesis is correct, we should expect such change to lag developments in the other two areas. The organizational benefits of “storming the castle” are already becoming apparent to conservative mobilizers. We

should expect some of these efforts to take institutional root, developing a large list and engaging conservative issue publics online and off. We should then expect conservative electoral candidates, facing a more challenging electoral environment, to start taking chances on new campaign consultants and innovative technologies and strategies. Many of these will fail, but the few that succeed will be lauded for their “strategic brilliance,” moving a new set of consultants and elected officials into the vanguard of the party. Only then will internal party cleavages be upset and reconfigured, with attendant consequences for ideological representation. As many of these “winners” and “losers” are sorted out only at the end of an electoral cycle, we should expect several more years of conservative online deficiencies before such power struggles are settled and new Republican elites assume significant power.

Then there are the Merry Pranksters to consider. To the extent that this thesis is correct, we should expect Republicans to experience a dearth of online infrastructure for even longer. It may even be the case that Republican attempts to build specific institutions – their own “MoveOn” or their own “DailyKos” – will prove unworkable. That said, the failure of Republican elites to build parallel institutions will only lead them to eventually lead in building even-more-novel online institutions. It is well worth remembering that the internet itself is not a mature, settled medium. Unlike any communications medium before it, the internet is constantly changing (the 2004 election lacked YouTube videos, for instance, because it lacked YouTube). As computing power continues to double, mobile access expands, and new online social institutions emerge, the future of online political engagement may lie not in counteracting MoveOn, but in innovating a new political “killer app” that upstages MoveOn. And here, Merry

Pranksters can have little affect. The crux of this thesis is that, once a practice is recognizable as “valuable online real estate,” partisan opponents will find it easy and fun to disrupt the practice in its early stages. Novel practices do not earn such a distinction until after they have proven themselves effective. Thus if the Merry Pranksters do prove too much of a burden for Republican attempts to replicate progressive successes, they will nonetheless be unable to stop the next major innovation which, retrospectively, Democrats will claim “no one saw coming.”

This paper is intentionally exploratory in nature. The topic of partisan online infrastructure has attracted minimal scholarly attention, and debates on the matter have seldom risen beyond the realm of anecdote. At this early stage, rigorous data analysis is nearly impossible, as the data which would distinguish between these competing theses lies somewhere in the future. The purpose of the paper, then, has been to more fully develop such theories and tease out their implications. It is my hope that it has proven provocative, and that it aids the research community in identifying where we *ought* to look for answers in the coming years. Empirically, I hope to have demonstrated that the conservative infrastructure deficit is a very real phenomenon, and that it indeed exists despite substantial attempts to build parallel institutions. Theoretically, I hope to have charted a course for determining why this is the case and hypothesizing the conditions under which the deficit will be bridged.

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